DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 958 UD 026 186

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TITLE An Explanation of the Beliefs, Values, and Attitudes of Black Students in Fairfax County.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 56p.; Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Conference (New Orleans, LA, April 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Blacks; *Black Students; Caste; Cultural Differences; Cultural Influences; *Educational Attainment; Educational Strategies; Occupational Aspiration; *Parent Aspiration; *Parents; *Student Attitudes; Student Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Fairfax County Schools VA; Ogbu (John)

ABSTRACT

The values, beliefs, and attitudes of black students in an intermediate school were studied. The cultural factors investigated included the following: (1) academic performance; (2) educational and occupational aspirations voiced by the students and their parents; (3) student behavior displayed in and out of school; (4) educational strategies devised by the students and their parents; and (5) expectations of student academic performance held by teachers and counselors. The findings indicate the presence of a modified caste system that prevents the majority of black students from crossing cultural boundaries and achieving academic success. Although the students generally voiced high educational and occupational aspirations, many aspired to careers in sport and entertainment that they were unlikely to achieve. Many who had lofty occupational goals failed to translate their expectations into appropriate school behavior. Some parents were unable to translate their high expectations into meaningful support. Interactions between students, teachers, and parents were marred by mistrust. Some students crossed the cultural barriers and performed well. Others took an oppositional stance, but most remained passive with regard to academic engagement. (VM)

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An Explanation of the Beliefs, Values, and Attitudes of Black Students in Fairfax County

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April, 1988

UD026186

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to investigate the beliefs, values, and attitudes guiding the behavior of a group of black students in an intermediate school in Fairfax County, Virginia. The cultural factors investigated included the following: the academic performance of the students; the educational and occupational aspirations voiced by the students and their parents; the student behaviors displayed in and out of the school; the educational strategies devised by the students and their parents; and the expectations of student academic performance held by their teachers and counselors.

BACKGROUND

Problem

Some thirty years after the Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education decision to eliminate inequality in American public education, the academic achievement of black students continues to lag behind that of their white counterparts. The national results most recently reported by the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) and the National Assessment on Educational Progress reveal that the scores of black students are significantly below those of the white students on verbal and mathematic tests and on reading. Discrepancies in science achievement have been reported by the Science Assessment and Research Project

of the University of Minnesota during its five-year investigation.

Similar differences in black and white student achievement have been found in Fairfax County, Virginia, a relatively affluent part of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. There, systemwide data was collected on standardized test scores, dropout rate, suspension rate, placement in special remedial and advanced programs, and on post-high school expectations. The analysis of the data led to the conclusion that the performance of black students was below that of white and Asian students on every indicator.

Theories to Account for Minority Achievement

Several theories to account for the low performance of minority students on standardized tests and other achievement indicators have been proposed. These explanations emphasize cultural deprivation or conflict, educational inequality, or genetic inferiority. All of these theories have been rejected as inadequate explanations of the poor performance of black students in Fairfax County.

The cultural deprivation theory, which provided the philosophical foundation for the federal compensatory education programs in the 1960's, stated that children from economically and/or culturally impoverished backgrounds lag behind in their linguistic, cognitive, and social

development and thus do poorly in school. Data on student achievement and school resources collected by Coleman and his associates (1966) led him to the conclusion that minority achievement is most closely associated with family background and socioeconomic status (SES) rather than school variables.

Researchers on effective schools (Guthrie, 1971; Edmonds and Frederickson, 1984; Jones and Spady, 1984; and Squiers, Huitt, and Segars, 1984) have challenged Coleman's view of the school as a passive conduit of poverty and suggest that he neglected some important practices affecting school achievement. The release of SAT scores by the CEEB indicate that SES factors alone do not explain the gap between black and white test scores; in 1982 black students from families with incomes over $50,000 scored 120 points less on SAT tests than white students in the same income group (Howard and Hammond, 1985). These differences have continued as the CEEB reports in its annual review of SAT scores.

Critics of the cultural deprivation theory such as Spradley (1980) and Valentine (1969) suggest that so-called culturally deprived children have an elaborate, adaptive culture that differs from that of the public school system. Other critics of the cultural deprivation theory (Ogbu, 1985) note that cultural differences do not automatically lead

to conflict or to school failure. Ogbu suggests that differences in school performance among minority groups are not due to cultural differences, but to the ability of minority groups to cross cultural boundaries.

Thus, the cultural deficiency/conflict theory was rejected generally on the basis that black students come from a group with strong cultural integrity, that cultural differences can exist without school failure, and SES factors alone cannot account for poor school performance. Specifically, in Fairfax County, the school system has mandated a human relations course for all teachers and administrators and a multi-cultural counseling program for its guidance personnel.

The educational inequality explanation was rejected because of the strong commitment of the county's financial and human resources to its educational program. With a school budget exceeding $650 million, the per pupil expenditure in Fairfax County exceeds $4500. Schools with large numbers of students deemed "at risk" receive additional funding for instructional supplies and staff. School groups such as the PTA or booster groups must have all purchases for their local schools approved by the School Board so that schools in the more affluent communities do not have the advantage of superior instructional supplies over those in the less affluent areas. Forty-seven

percent of the teachers hold advanced degrees, and many of the instructional programs developed by the county have received countrywide and international attention. The school system has initiated mastery reading programs, sponsored school organizations to improve minority academic achievement and personal coping skills, and set up special programs to identify and help high risk students.

The most controversial explanation for the poor performance of black minority students is that of genetic inferiority. This theory, elaborated by Jensen, has been criticized for its erroneous mathematics, faulty methodology, distortion of research results, and failure to seek alternate explanations (Hirsch, 1981; Ogbu, 1978; and Rabbit, 1985). Specifically there are no studies which would show that genes, controlling conceptual learning, abstract thinking, and problem solving--i.e. Jensen's level 2 thinking--are found in higher proportion among whites than blacks. In a review of studies of intelligence tests Neisser (1986) notes that the relative difficulty of items for all groups being tested was affected by wording, by item length, by degree of visualization required, and by factual contents--but not by the amount of abstract thinking involved. Therefore, the theory of genetic inferiority was rejected for its questionable assumptions, presumptions, and interpretations.

Ogbu's Theory of Status Mobility

None of the above theories offers adequate and complete explanations for the poor performance of black students in school. Ogbu (1985) has suggested that the way education is perceived and responded to depends upon the economic niche of a particular group, their historical experience or anticipation in using education for personal, economic gain, and their evolved values and cultural frame of reference. That is, each group has its particular "folk theory" of success or status mobility which includes the type of behavior leading to success and the ideal, successful people or role models. When members of a group believe that one must do well in school in order to achieve social mobility, they will select strategies and model their behaviors after those that promote school success. Parents will encourage their children to adopt such behaviors, and the children will act in a manner conducive to academic success. If, however, children and parents do not perceive education as a necessary part of their status mobility system, their achievement motivation and behavior will reflect that view of educational irrelevance for them.

In his ethnographic study of the segregated school system in Stockton, California in the 1960's and 1970's Ogbu found that the limited occupational opportunities or

job ceiling imposed upon black and Hispanic adults in the community were observed by the adolescents and apparently affected their own educational and occupational aspirations. He also found that the school, through teacher and counselor expectations and instructional content and methods, limited the occupational opportunities available to students and perpetuated the low expectations-low performance cycle. Ogbu concluded that the structure of opportunities available in adult society strongly affect the qualities that schools transmit to their students and the qualities the students strive to possess.

In 1978 Ogbu expanded his status mobility theory to account for differences between "castelike" minorities, forcibly brought to a country, and freely immigrating minorities. Initially the caste minority has primary (real) differences in style and culture with the dominant group--differences which exist prior to contact between the dominant and minority groups. After contact between the two groups occurs, the inferior political, economic, and ritual roles of the caste are defined and rationalized by the majority. Then, secondary cultural differences of style are developed by the caste minority as a way of coping with exploitation and domination. Thus the caste minority has two sets of cultural differences to be transcended--primary differences due to content and

secondary differences in style. In school, for example, the caste minorities have problems crossing cultural boundaries because of their treatment by the schools and because of the way they respond to teaching and learning. Ogbu (1985) maintains that blacks, lacking a cultural frame of reference that encourages school success, experience "persistent mis-match in cognitive styles, communication styles, and interactional etiquettes" (p. 20). Even when blacks accepted education as a part of their status mobility system, Ogbu found that students diverted their efforts into non-academic activities and failed to match aspirations with appropriate school behaviors.

In summary, alternate theories to account for the gap between black and white school performance have been proposed and rejected as adequate explanations. The purpose of this study was to determine if the values, attitudes, and beliefs characteristic of a caste minority, as defined by Ogbu, are exhibited in an affluent suburban school district.

METHODOLOGY

Population

Fairfax County, located in a 400-square mile area of Northern Virginia, is a part of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Its 1985 population of 668,000 persons

consisted of 90% white and 10% black, Asian, Hispanic, and other ethnic groups. The occupational distribution of the work force is shown in Table 2.1. The district's 1985 school population of 125,516 students was distributed in 116 elementary schools (K-6), 19 intermediate schools (7-8), 20 high schools (9-12), 3 secondary schools (7-12), and 20 special education centers. During the 1984-85 school year 87.1% of the graduating seniors advanced to post-secondary education, and 2.1% of the students dropped out prior to graduation.

The school selected for the study had a population of 512 students of whom 60% were white, 14% were black, 7% were Hispanic, and 19% were Asian. The students generally fell within the mid-range of socio-economic status. In 1980 blacks in the district had a median income of $14,172 and a mean income of $14,112; whites had a median income of $18,762 and a mean of $23,650. School records on free or reduced-price lunches, which are given on the basis of financial need, indicate that the majority of those eligible for the program were foreign-born, primarily Asian, Afghan, and Hispanic. Approximately 16% of the black students in the school participated in the lunch program and constituted 15% of the students receiving free or reduced price lunches.

Employment in the various occupations by working

Table 2.1 Occupations of Blacks and Whites in Fairfax County

Type of Occupation	Percentage of each group in occupation	
	Whites	Blacks
Agriculture	.9	.9
Mining and forestry	.1	.1
Construction	6.1	5.6
Manufacturing	5.4	5.2
Transportation	3.6	5.9
Communication	2.6	3.9
Wholesale trade	2.5	1.7
Retail trade	13.8	13.1
Banking	2.9	2.9
Insurance	4.8	3.3
Business and repairs	8.7	8.9
Private households	.5	2.2
Personal services	1.9	2.7
Entertainment and recreation	1.0	.9
Professional and religious	22.3	23.0
Public administration	22.4	19.7
TOTALS	100.	100.

members of the school community reflected the occupational distribution of the county as a whole. School data indicated that 56% of the parents had some college training; 36% had ended their formal education with high school graduation; and 8% had not graduated from high school. Data collected from the black students indicated that these occupational and educational patterns were similar for black students also.

Slightly less than one-half of all students lived with both parents. Students lived in all forms of housing available in Northern Virginia: single family dwellings, high rise and garden apartments, townhouses, and condominiums. The student mobility rate for the school was relatively high at 19%--i.e. between the first and last day of school in 1986-87 19% of the students moved to another school.

Participants

Participants in the study were all of the black students of one of the smaller intermediate schools in Fairfax County, their peers, teachers, counselors, parents, and others significant in their lives. The 46 students participating in the study differed from each other in the categories of academic achievement, SES, documented classroom behaviors, and reported values and attitudes. Among those interviewed were the following

categories: those on the Honor Roll and those failing several subjects; those who received social services and economic assistance and those whose parents were economically affluent; those living with a single parent and those from intact families; those who "loved" school and those who "hated" it; those who were in frequent trouble in the office and those who were considered models of behavior by their teachers. Those who were popular with their classmates, for various reasons, participated, as well as those viewed as "ordinary kids" by their peers and teachers.

Instrumentation

Ethnographic methods were chosen for the study to enable the researcher to examine participants' motives, behaviors, and interactions in their own environments. By the end of the school year all of the 46 participants had been observed and/or interviewed. A list of specific interview questions was compiled on attitudes toward school and teachers, educational and career aspirations, parental and peer support, and academic strategies; other questions evolved from the interviews. Each interview lasted at least an hour, and certain students considered "key informants" were sought out for more information or classification. The researcher also interviewed the students' teachers, counselors, school administrators, and

school social worker; parents or significant others of ten of the students were interviewed at work or at school.

Students were observed formally in the classroom and informally in the school cafeteria and gymnasium, in the hallways, on the bus ramps, and in the sites for after-school activities. During the observations the researcher focused on student verbal and non-verbal communication patterns, academic strategies, learning styles, and involvement with academic and extra-curricular activities. The interactions between teachers and students were analyzed for clues to implicit and explicit expectations of student academic achievement. School records and interview responses were used to obtain additional information on student behaviors.

Other documents and records with information relevant to the study included the school yearbook and newspaper, morning announcements over the public address system, official school reports to the superintendent, and daily attendance reports. Additional information on academic performance was obtained from reports prepared by the guidance staff and reading teachers.

The researcher attempted to record the participants' words as accurately as possible and to record their actions and interactions within the setting in objective terms, so that inferences could be freely drawn by other

researchers. Other participants and data sources were used to confirm the researcher's own perceptions. The patterns which emerged from the data analysis are reported in the following section.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Black Student Academic Performance

The academic achievement of black students at Lowell Intermediate School, where the study was conducted, lagged behind that of their white counterparts, as it did in Fairfax County and throughout the nation. The black students scored considerably lower (19 to 24 percentile points) on the standardized SRA tests given in the eighth grade than the white students. A survey of semester grades indicated that black students who represented 14% of the student population constituted 28% of those receiving D's and F's and 4% of those getting A's and B's. They were underrepresented in the Gifted/Talented Program (4% of total) and overrepresented in the Special Education Program (81%). No blacks were enrolled in the eighth grade algebra or advanced English classes.

When asked to account for the discrepancy in black and white achievement, the answers given by the students, teachers, and parents varied widely, as did the academic strategies employed by the students and the support given by their families. These variations in perceptions,

strategies, and structure will be described in the following sections.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Black Student Culture

When Lowell Intermediate School was first opened in 1966 it served a population composed of mostly white students from middle to upper class neighborhoods and a small group of black students. Two years prior to the opening of the school, the desegregation of Fairfax County schools had been ordered by the U.S. District Court. Many of the teachers at the school had no experience teaching black students or working with black colleagues. In the years since its opening the Lowell student body has fluctuated in size and racial composition due to changes in housing patterns and the influx of immigrants into Fairfax County.

Those teachers who were associated with Lowell since its opening attributed a decline in student performance to the change in student population and family support for education. The math teacher indicated his perception of his black students' family background:

> What do you expect of kids who grow up in these homes where there are no books, no magazines, no newspapers? They spend all their time watching TV ... they just don't care about getting an education.

Other teachers shared that perception of black students living in culturally deprived homes, although research into reading habits of Lowell students indicated that such stereotypical perceptions had little basis in reality. A survey of reading patterns indicated no significant differences in the responses of black and white students; both groups reported subscriptions to a daily newspaper and/or magazines.

The teachers at Lowell, like those observed by Ogbu, believed that they were primarily responsible for the education of Lowell students and expected parents to seek their help and follow their suggestions. The teachers expected parents to show their concern by calling the school, requesting a conference, or writing a note. Failure of the parents to do any of these things was viewed as lack of parental interest.

One teacher expressed her exasperation with the lack of parental interest when she described Wendall, a black seventh grader who was failing her English class: "His parents just don't care. I keep sending those F-interims [interim quarterly reports] home, and I haven't gotten any response from his parents." Later, Wendall's English teacher said she was "amazed" when Wendall's mother called to request a conference: "She really sounded nice on the telephone--very well-spoken and intelligent."

A survey of student records indicated that teachers did not always welcome parent involvement, however, especially when it conflicted with their own educational judgements. Angela's experience in the sixth grade was an example of the teacher's sense of certainty and patronizing attitude toward the parents, described as "clientage mentality" by Ogbu.

Described as a capable and conscientious seventh grader, Angela, according to her records, had experienced some "difficulty in keeping up" in the sixth grade. Angela's mother recalled that she and Angela's teacher agreed to determine Angela's status--as a rising seventh grader or sixth grade repeater--before the end of the school year. Two weeks before the end of school, however, Angela's teacher told her she would be repeating the sixth grade. Angela's mother recalled her feelings and actions:

> I was furious! We had an agreement, and that woman [the teacher] ignored it! I sent her a letter, that I typed at work, recounting the procedure that we had agreed on and asking why she had ignored our agreement ... but that whole thing [incident] showed me that you have to fight to get what you want ... you can't just let the school tell you what to do.

Other parents expressed their interest in being informed about their child's school progress and their belief that parents had the most concern about students and that the school could not always be trusted to act in behalf of the student's best interest.

In contrast, conversations with teachers about the black students at Lowell reflected the belief that black parents frequently made the wrong choices for their children and had priorities counter to those of the teachers. The math teacher announced that Lamonde just lost his second math book:

> When I told him he'd have to pay for it, he said, "My momma told me she wasn't going to buy any more math books after the first [lost] one"! I said, "Well, Lamonde, you'll just have to quit wearing those $49 Adidas [shoes] you've been sporting"!

A recurring lunch time conversational topic in the teachers' room was that of the welfare mother. One teacher lamented the situation of "the [black] welfare mothers who won't work and keep on having children that I have to pay for."

A search of occupational status through school records and interviews with students and staff members confirmed,

however, the existence of only two "welfare mothers" who did not work and received assistance through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The socialworker confirmed that the parents of the black students work--many at two jobs--so that they can live in Fairfax County and send their children to school in the district. He noted: "It takes a lot of money to live in Fairfax County when a one bedroom apartment goes for $500 a month."

The black families at the other end of the socio-economic spectrum were considered noteworthy by the teachers and evoked comments such as, "Michelle comes from a very affluent family--her father owns his own business," or "Allison's parents are both doctors." Most teachers, however, seemed to be unaware of the occupational level of the black students' parents; they assumed that most of them were on a lower socioeconomic level.

Teacher Expectations of Black Academic Achievement

After the issue of the school system's report on minority education and programs in 1984 the board directed school officials to develop policies to promote black and Hispanic academic achievement. All of the teachers were told, in general faculty meetings and in content area meetings, of the thrust to promote student achievement

through higher teacher expectations.

When questioned about their own expectations, most Lowell teachers insisted that they had the highest expectations for all of their students. Interviews, conversations, and observations indicated, however, that the teachers' expectations were influenced by their perceptions of black culture frequently stereotypical in nature and that teachers were often unaware of the nature of their own perceptions and expectations of black students.

On occasion teachers' remarks seem to reflect their own ambiguous feelings toward their black students and their expectations for them. One day in the teachers' room during lunch, the math and social studies teachers were discussing Mary and Richard, both straight A students. Mary, born of Ethiopian parents, described herself as black, as did Richard, the son of black-white parents. After discussing the outstanding work of the two students, one teacher said, very quietly to the other, "You know they both call themselves blacks ... and I don't know why. They could pass for whites or foreigners." The other teacher responded, "No, I didn't understand it either." The unspoken implication was: why would anyone call him/herself a black when he/she could pass for white?

Educational Attitudes and Goals of Black Families

Teachers and staff members at Lowell generally

believed that black students did not achieve academically on the same level as their white classmates because their parents did not value education and did not "push" their children to get an education. This belief was accompanied by the assumption that few of the parents of the black students at Lowell had received more than a minimum (i.e. high school diploma) of education themselves. The data collected from interviews and observations indicates that both assumptions were invalid.

A survey of the 46 black students who were interviewed indicated that 60% of their parents had received some form of higher education, and only 7% had failed to graduate from high school; 33% ended their formal education with high school graduation. The educational experiences and attitudes of the adult black community of Lowell tended to fall into three categories: (a) education as a continuation of family tradition, (b) education as a means of upgrading current occupational status or entering new fields, and (c) education as a means of occupational escape, not previously available to blacks. Their parents' educational attitudes and experiences in all categories were referenced when the black students were asked to describe their own educational goals and expectations.

The majority of the black students interviewed had

parents who used education to enter new professions or to advance in their current job situation. These families occupied all levels of the occupational hierarchy and varied widely in socioeconomic status. Mr. Jenkins, friend of student Teddy Miller and his family, described how he had prepared for a career in computer programming despite his counselors' advice to pursue psychology or sociology, "like all black students."

Mr. Jenkins also spoke of how his peers, black males in their late 20's, were shocked to find that his financial rewards came from his occupational and educational status. He recounted a chance meeting with a former high school acquaintance:

> One day I ran into this guy I went to high school with. He saw the Porsche [Mr. Jenkins' car] and said, "What're you doing now?" I told him I was working in computers. He didn't believe me ... he thought I was a pimp, and that's how I got the car. He couldn't believe I worked for it; that I earned it. He kept on saying, "Come on now, who're you pimping for?"

Many students spoke of the importance their parents placed on education as preparation for occupational opportunities and economic advancement. They also reported on a second message that they received from

their parents. That second message, based on their parents' experiences involving discrimination and lack of opportunity, was that blacks must be better trained and better educated--"twice as good"--to get the same job as a white person. Over and over the students repeated this theme; Angela talked about her mother's job with a government agency: "My mother said that when a white person in her office makes a mistake, that's just an error ... but when a black makes a mistake, that's a disaster."

Even if their parents or other adults did not verbalize this notion of higher standards for blacks, the students seemed to accept it as a part of their belief system. As Mary, a straight A student who wants to attend Harvard, Yale, Brown, or Princeton said:

> If I'm going up for a job against a white girl and we're both equal and the person hiring us is white, the other girl will get the job. I'll have to be better to get it ... my parents don't believe this, but I do.

Their belief that higher standards would be required for blacks did not prevent the students from having high expectations--educational and occupational--for themselves. Of the 46 students interviewed, 89% indicated that they were interested in getting some form of higher education. In describing their occupational choices students seemed

to be most influenced by the careers they saw portrayed in the media and by those of their parents or some other figure significant to them. About one quarter of the boys expressed a keen interest in professional sports--either basketball or football. Many of the girls wanted to become actresses or models.

Few of the students who expressed an interest in a particular profession were aware of the educational requirements and training for the job. Richard was an exception. With the goal of becoming an astronaut, he described the course he had charted for himself to the Naval Academy, pilot training, and then astronaut training. Richard's father had a naval career, and Richard indicated that they had explored alternatives to the Naval Academy should he not be accepted.

Many of the students interviewed had professional career goals but poor academic records. They spoke of becoming doctors, lawyers, computer experts, and professionals even when their passing to the next grade level was in doubt. "I always thought I'd like to have 'Doctor' in front of my name," said Scott, whose intermediate school grade point average was a 1.4 on a 4.0 scale.

Thus, the black students at Lowell had high career expectations for themselves and generally perceived education as the means of achieving their ambitions. Their

professed goals, however, were unrealistic based upon their understanding of the academic proficiency and educational training needed for professional careers. Nor did the students exhibit much awareness of the extraordinary talent, discipline, or good fortune needed to achieve success in a "celebrity field" such as athletics, modeling, or entertaining.

Black Students' Coping Strategies and Behaviors in School

Although the majority of black students expressed interest in ambitious careers and the requisite education for them, their observed behaviors indicated a failure, for most of them, to select appropriate academic strategies to achieve their goals. They never articulated the notion of a primary job ceiling or a limitation upon their occupational expectations, except for the need for better qualifications by blacks; but they did express, by voice and by action, the belief that academic achievement was primarily associated with whites. The attitude that getting good grades conflicted with the student's black identity surfaced repeatedly in individual interviews and in group discussions.

Lester, a seventh grade boy born in Sierra Leone, educated in New York City elementary schools, and self-described as a black American, voiced his opinion in band class when the subject of getting good grades was being

discussed. He stated, "Getting good grades is for white kids ... if a black kid gets good grades, the other kids [black] think he is acting white." The other black students--all boys--agreed: "You can't be black and get good grades."

David, a black eighth grader who scored in the 99th percentile on all of his SRA tests said, "You [a black male] can't get good grades unless you're strong." When asked to explain his comments, he shook his head and spoke very softly:

> I mean you've got to be strong, like good in sports or lifting weights or something like that ... if you're an athlete it's okay, but if you're just an ordinary kid, you can't survive. If you get good grades, the other kids'll just 'kill you' ... your life will be awful.

In all of his classes, despite his measured academic potential, David maintained a very low profile and achieved modest academic success with a B-C average.

Both male and female students agreed that it was more acceptable for a black female to strive for and receive good grades, but neither males nor females who were academically successful were immune from criticism.

Students either accepted the belief that academic achievement was at odds with their culture, rejected the belief, or reached some compromise with it. Their decision of how to deal with that important aspect of the black student value system was reflected in the behaviors and coping strategies they used in and out of the social setting.

About one-fourth of the students chose strategies of active involvement with the academic process which promoted conventional academic success. A smaller number chose strategies allowing for total disengagement with the academic process and academic failure. The third group--the majority of black students--showed neutral coping behaviors which were between these extremes of traditional school involvement with the subsequent varying degrees of academic success.

One of the simplest academic strategies used by a student is to attend class and to get to class on time. Of the total black population at Lowell, 7% had an excessive number of absences; (i.e. more than 10% of the days in attendance); 22% had an above-average rate of absenteeism; and 71% had an average or below-average rate of absenteeism. An analysis of the data on tardiness indicates, however, that black students were overrepresented in unexcused tardies and slightly underrepresented in

the excused tardies, usually due to a student's oversleeping or missing the school bus. The black students constituted 42% of the unexcused tardies and 11% of the excused tardies.

Two black males, Darrell and Scott, used absenteeism, tardiness, and disruptive behavior very effectively to manipulate their educational experiences. Through absences, late arrivals, and suspensions each managed to reduce the amount of time spent in the classroom by one-fourth or one-fifth of the 180 days of attendance required by the state--a record unmatched by any other students in the school.

A more frequently used strategy to avoid work in school was that of coming to class without materials. For example, Robert used this strategy in every class, including health and physical education. Typically he came to class on time, but without his textbook and/or notebook or gym suit and asked the teacher to let him go back to his locker, the cafeteria, previous classroom, or wherever he had left the item. If the teacher gave Robert permission to "take the pass," he left and returned 10-15 minutes later--sometimes with the item and sometimes not. When he returned with the materials necessary for class, Robert started to work--some 20 minutes behind his classmates--and rarely completed his

class assignments. Some of Robert's teachers got disgusted with his forgetfulness and refused to let him leave the room. When that happened, Robert either did nothing or spent 10-15 minutes trying to borrow materials from his classmates. And that also disgusted his teachers.

These strategies of not bringing classroom materials were not used solely by black students, but the black students were overrepresented in the group using these strategies, especially black males. These students, like Robert and Teddy, were not perceived as rude, threatening, or hostile or as major behavior problems by their teachers or other students. Neither were they viewed as successful students; rather they were judged to be working below their potential, close to failure, disinterested, and minor disturbances in the classroom.

The black students at Lowell who were most academically successful were observed to take responsibility for their learning and to seek the help and support of others--teachers, parents, friends, and peers--when they thought it was needed. These students adopted strategies of active engagement with the academic process; they were quiet and attentive in class; they did their homework and classwork; they were polite and pleasant to their teachers and classmates; and they never caused any trouble.

Elaine was an academically successful eighth grader

who used her self-discipline and coping strategies to achieve her goals, in and out of school. In class she did all of the things which elicited positive teacher response, but, more significantly, she was one of the few students to ask for help or clarification from the teacher.

In social studies class Elaine "ran into" economics in the spring and "didn't know what hit her." She went to her counselor for help and asked him to set up a conference with her mother and social studies teacher. Afterwards Elaine analyzed her encounter with economics:

> Well, you know black kids just don't have experience with economics like white kids do ... we don't sit around and listen to our parents talk about buying stocks and bonds. We'd never talked like that in my family ... so I had to get my teacher to give me some extra help with it. I still think it's boring, but she let me make up the first test [that] I failed ... so I got a C+ on the unit.

Elaine's guidance counselor discussed her willingness to seek--even demand--help:

> Elaine is really an unusual case ... I have such a hard time getting kids to go to their teachers for help ... even to talk to them.

> And most of the time it's the student and the teacher who need to be talking to each other ... I don't need to be involved.

Elaine countered negative peer pressure by using a network of peer, family, and adult support for her interests in and out of school. Her closest black friends, Allison and Toni, lived in her mostly white, townhouse neighborhood, and their families were friendly and socialized with each other. The three girls had similar academic and educational goals, and they were seen together throughout the school day. After school they did their homework and studying together.

At the other end of the behavioral spectrum were those students who actively sought to avoid engagement in the traditional learning process in the classroom. Some of the tactics used by these students included ignoring the teacher's instructions, attempting to gain peer attention, or acting to stop the instructional process or "disruptive" behavior. These strategies usually resulted in teacher disapproval and disciplinary action. These disengagement strategies were used by males and females, but were observed more frequently in males and more frequently by black students.

In science class while the teacher was reviewing for the final exam, Stephan was observed to be lying across a

lab table with his eyes closed. When two of his classmates saw the observer looking at Stephan, they burst out laughing: "Man, that Stephan's fast asleep ... he's really going to get a good grade on this exam. He's learning while he's sleeping ... getting it [the information] in his dreams"! Stephan stirred slightly, but kept his eyes closed. Later his science teacher described Stephan as "capable, but totally unmotivated ... won't do anything. Today I told the students to leave him alone, just let him sleep."

Other students were observed to be disengaged from the instructional process, although they rarely slept in class. Usually the girls wrote notes or read; the boys usually read. Some teachers attempted to involve them in classroom activity by calling on them; other teachers had adopted the attitude that a student has the right to fail.

Junior, a cheerful, energetic eighth grader used conversation and "horseplay" to avoid engagement with learning activities. In his vocational technology class Junior began the period by walking around the classroom giving the "glad hand" to several male members of the class, black and white, with comments such as, "What's happening, man?" and "What's going down, dude?". When the bell rang and the teacher started giving directions

for the day's work on individual projects, Junior was quiet. When the teacher told the students to get to work, Junior walked over to a group of boys and started talking about a program on TV the night before. The teacher looked over at Junior who moved on to talk with another male student. After a few minutes Junior and that student were circling around each other, fists in a raised position, as if preparing for a boxing match; both boys were laughing and taunting each other in a good-natured way. The teacher looked over at them and said calmly, "Boys, get to work or get out." One of Junior's classmates [black] who had been working on his project spoke up:

> Junior, you're just fooling around! Ten years from now I'll be working and driving a new car ... you'll still be in eighth grade, waiting for your kids to catch up to you. Yeah, you and your kids'll all be in the eighth grade.

Other disengaged students, such as Scott and Darrell, also used disruptive, defiant tactics to divert attention from academic matters to social interactions. In the process they managed to intimidate, psychologically and physically, teachers and students. Consequently, the two boys, especially Darrell, were perceived as very powerful figures in the school who exerted an enormous amount of influence.

The teachers complained that Darrell "did his own thing" in class and was not amenable to teacher suggestion or correction. "You have to treat him with kid gloves," said his science teacher. He frequently came to class late and without any necessary supplies. Throughout the year Darrell continued to bring his Walkman radio to class so that he could listen to his "tunes" in school, although his teachers continued to send him to the office for violating school rules. When he returned to class, without the Walkman, Darrell frequently sat at his desk, moving his head and drumming his fingers "to the beat" as if he were still listening to the music.

Both in and out of class the teachers and administrators suspected Darrell of threatening other students for extra money. Although the students did not report him for his "shake-down tactics," other students did confirm the staff's suspicion about Darrell's "panhandling," threatening tactics. Darrell was reported to be more successful in getting money from white male students than from other groups at Lowell.

Darrell and Scott were the most frequently suspended students--each averaging over 15 days of class absence due to suspensions. The assistant principal suggested that students such as Scott and Darrell who were repeatedly suspended were responsible for the disproportionate number

of black students on the yearly suspension report. The black students (14% of the student body) constituted 52% of the suspensions and 28% of the lunch referrals. The statistics on suspensions and referrals revealed a pattern similar to those on tardiness; a few students appeared frequently on the list and blacks were overrepresented. Disruptive behavior, resulting in exclusion from classroom learning activities, seemed to be an academic strategy selected by a disproportionate number of black males at Lowell during the 1986-87 school year.

Students such as Darrell and Scott, and to a lesser extent, Junior, were perceived by the school staff as "difficult, disruptive" students who demanded and received an inordinate amount of time and negative attention. The achievers such as Mary and Elaine also received a large amount of time and positive attention from their teachers because they demanded it. The majority of the black students, regardless of their innate abilities, did not demand, nor did they receive, such attention.

Their strategy for coping with academic demands was that of moderate to slight engagement in the traditional instructional process. In keeping a low profile, they maintained a passive, as opposed to an active, stance in regard to their teachers and classroom instruction. These students were observed to come to class on time with the

necessary supplies; to listen, to do their classwork, if not their homework; and to cause little trouble. They never volunteered to answer questions, nor did they ask their teachers for any clarification or extra help; they responded to the teacher only when called upon. Instead, these students were observed to try to conceal from the class at large, their understanding or lack of understanding of the instructional content of the class. Their grades were usually average--C's and B's.

Student Interactions Outside the Classroom

The general unwillingness of the black students to engage in academic competition was also evident in their participation in extracurricular activities at Lowell. They were underrepresented in activities with an academic thrust, but chose to participate in intramural sports and clubs and organizations, such as Drama Club, Student Government Association (SGA), the school newspaper and yearbook, and the Spring Fashion Show. When asked about their lack of participation in some events many of the students indicated interest in other things or responsibilities at home. Only a few of them, who were academically successful, indicated any awareness that involvement in certain extracurricular activities could enhance their academic performance in the classroom.

Outside of school students reported that they were

most likely to "get in trouble" between the time school was out and when their parents got home from work. Most of the fights that occurred between Lowell students took place after school and in the student's neighborhood after the student got off the school bus. More than half the fights involved black students from Lowell fighting other blacks from Lowell; in the other cases the blacks from Lowell were involved with groups of blacks from the adjoining school district of Alexandria.

In most of the fights a few males were the main participants, and the issue for them seemed to involve proving one's toughness or "who's going to be the biggest man," as described by Darrell. Students also fought over rumored insults and contested objects, such as tapes, bicycle parts, or other personal items. The students used their fists as weapons although threats were made to bring in "burners" (guns) or other weapons such as bats or sticks.

Occasionally females were also involved; their fights usually revolved around boyfriends and/or rumors that were being circulated about them. Their fighting techniques involved punching, slapping, and hair pulling. In all of the fights involving females, boys were involved as observers and as possible "back-ups" for the participants.

Mrs. Jones, one of the black parents who was a

teacher in another school system, wrote a letter to her son's counselor and LDSC teacher voicing her concern about the fights among the students and their impact on student achievement:

> I am becoming increasingly concerned about the inappropriate behavior exhibited by some of our young Black men at Lowell. The fights and fracuses are certainly not indicative of the normal characteristics that occur during this period of adolescence. This behavior is disruptive and can lead to the destruction (or at least the delay) of the educational achievements and the proper social interactions we desire them to attain.

Mrs. Jones' concern was echoed by Lowell guidance counselors and administrators who felt that students wasted their time and energy in inter-group squabbles and arguments. The black counselor stated: "These students try so hard to be macho and tough ... if only they'd put that energy into their school work, instead of wasting their time, and ours, on fights and arguments that start at home."

The amount of structure in their home lives and family support for academic achievement varied for the Lowell students. In some households students adhered to a

schedule with military precision. In other households there appeared to be no enforceable rules and students were, by their own admission, nearly beyond the control of their parents. In all households, students were given some duties and responsibilities by their parents. The jobs most frequently assigned were babysitting, cleaning, and cooking.

Some students, such as Elaine, had a time for homework built into a highly structured schedule of activities. Others who had less structured home lives spoke of the importance of adult supervision and encouragement with school work. Some students reported that they had to go outside their family when they needed help beyond active encouragement. Then they turned to their peers or other adults from the community. A few of the students rarely exchanged information about school with their parents and had no time for homework built into their schedules. Darrell, for instance, never brought books home or did any school work at home. He was frequently described by his classmates as someone who "does what he wants to ... his mother can't do anything with him."

A slight majority--54%--of the black Lowell students who were interviewed lived with both parents, a parent and step-parent, or father only. Nearly half of the students (46%) who lived with their mothers had no

contact with their fathers and for some of these students the absence of a father appeared to be a major life issue. In describing their family situations these students frequently expressed sadness or anger. When asked about her father, Allison commented vehemently: "There is no Mr. Dickerson, as far as I'm concerned."

Some of the students in households headed by their mothers reported the presence of a male figure who played a dominant role in offering career and educational advice and specific help with school projects. The students with step-fathers frequently expressed admiration and respect for their step-fathers. Those students from divorced or separated parents who stayed in contact with their fathers viewed their fathers as significant people in their lives.

Most of the students interviewed described being part of an extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, and almost always, a grandmother. The movement pattern most frequently reported was that of relatives who moved to Northern Virginia, found employment and housing, and encouraged other family members to join them.

The measures that parents took to influence student grades appeared to be independent of family structure, just as the structuring of home responsibilities including homework sessions. Some parents offered positive, tangible

rewards for good grades. Leticia was given $5 for every A and $2 for a B on her report cards; Allison got a trip to King's Dominion (a large amusement park, 100 miles away) for her A-B report cards.

Students who got poor grades or failing grades reported that their parents' response was to give them some tutorial assistance, give verbal encouragement or reprimands, withdraw personal privileges, or contact the school. Tutors were hired, not only to help students who were failing a subject, but also to help those whose grades were satisfactory. When Mary transferred to Fairfax County from another school system, her mother was not satisfied with the rigor of the courses offered in Mary's new school. She hired a tutor for Mary so that "she wouldn't be losing ground" in comparison to her performance in her old school.

The punishments most frequently imposed for poor grades were restriction of TV and telephone privileges and "being grounded" or not being allowed to leave the house and see their friends. The students who had been grounded or "on restriction" agreed that it was painful. Students agreed that parental inconsistency in enforcing punishments or merely verbal reprimands "didn't do any good." Teddy admitted that "after I bring home bad grades, my Mom puts me on restriction. Then two or three

days later she forgets about it, and so do I."

Few of the students or their parents indicated that they contacted the student's teacher when the student brought home a poor or failing grade. It was observed that teachers were more likely to initiate contacts with parents about poor student performance. Other teachers and counselors reported that they encountered a similar reluctance among other parents to contact teachers. The guidance director commented:

> I don't know what it is, that these parents don't want to talk with teachers. That would seem to be the most basic step to take if your child is failing, but a lot of these parents don't seem to want to do it. I don't think it's because they don't care ... they just don't know how important it is.

The out-of-school interests of black students at Lowell seemed to fall into general categories. Most of the students listed watching television, going to movies, and being with friends and family as special interests. The females also mentioned shopping for clothes, and the males were nearly unanimously interested in sports. The majority of the boys played some sport, either on an intramural team, a community team, or in a casual neighborhood setting. They watched sports events on

TV and read about athletes and their achievements in newspapers and magazines.

Another activity, reported by both males and females, was that of attending church. Nearly half of the students interviewed reported that they attended church with a parent or family member, frequently an aunt or a grandmother. Rarely was the church located in the immediate neighborhood; it was often a church in another area where a family member had old ties. The students reported on numerous activities sponsored by their churches which offered opportunities to be with other students. Teddy's comments seemed to reflect the socialization aspects of church attendance. He said he didn't go to church, but one of his friends did, "I haven't noticed that George has gotten any better since he started going [to church], but he says it's a good place to meet girls." Several of the parents interviewed cited church as a "strong influence in the black community." Mr. Davidson commented:

> We live in such a transient society ... there's so much moving around up here, it's hard for kids to know what their values are, or their parents, for that matter. But I want my girls to know what's really important and to care about other people and not just focus on

themselves.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this study indicate the presence of a modified caste system which prevents the majority of black students from crossing cultural boundaries and achieving academic success. Many of Ogbu's findings in his Stockton study and subsequent research were corroborated in Fairfax.

Although students generally voiced high educational and occupational aspirations for themselves, an inordinately large number of them aspired to careers in sports and entertainment which seemed unlikely to be achieved. The researcher concluded that those choices resulted from historical limitations experienced by blacks in occupational choices which still affect black youth.

Many of those who had lofty occupational goals failed to translate their expectations in appropriate school behaviors. In Fairfax many black students showed the same "mismatch in communication, interactional etiquette, and cognitive styles" that Ogbu found in Stockton. They also operated from the same oppositional frame of reference found by Fordham and Ogbu in Washington, D. C.. Underlying the unwillingness of most black students to engage in academic competition was the perception of getting good grades as "acting white" and therefore as

inappropriate behavior for black students. Consciously, or not, most black students tailored their academic performance to the scaled-down expectations of others, including themselves.

In describing job goals and opportunities for themselves the students repeated their parents' perceptions of a secondary, as opposed to a primary, job ceiling. Students in Fairfax did not perceive themselves locked out of certain professions or subject to a primary job ceiling as did those in Stockton, but did describe occupational limitations or a secondary job ceiling. That secondary job ceiling was seen as part of a system which required blacks to be better qualified in order to compete with their white counterparts. The system was also viewed as limiting the continued advancement of blacks once they reached a certain occupational level and of providing greater penalties for blacks who made errors in their work, similar to those of their white co-workers.

Parents in the study voiced high expectations for their students and a belief in the value of education. They were definitely interested in their students' academic progress, but were frequently unable to translate their interest into meaningful support. Often the black parents failed to understand the type of communication and response expected by the school, and their lack of

know-how was perceived as lack of interest by the school staff.

The data suggests that the teachers' perceptions of their black students were molded by their own cultural perspectives and historical experiences. The black students and their parents were generally viewed in terms of their birth-ascribed status, as opposed to their achieved status, which supported the theory of a caste minority in Fairfax. Teachers generally attributed the underachievement of their black students to cultural deprivation and lack of parental concern. Convinced of their own expertise, Fairfax teachers exhibited the same patronizing attitude toward students as the Stockton teachers observed by Ogbu. They had limited knowledge and understanding of the black students and their families. Communication with parents rarely occurred before the student was having difficulty in school, due to the teachers' low expectations of parental interest and the tendency of black parents to avoid communication with the teacher. Consequently, when communication occurred, it was often marred by feelings of mistrust by both parents and teachers.

A few of the students successfully crossed the cultural barriers and performed well in school. Those students acknowledged the "conflict between their black identity"

and academic excellence, and used their peers and family for support in and out of school. Other students engaged in active oppositional strategies in school, but the majority maintained a passive posture in regard to academic engagement. They failed to recognize a relationship between the choice of extracurricular activities and academic success. Some of the students used their time after school to participate in activities which promoted conflict within the community and diverted themselves even further from academic pursuits.

Specific researcher recommendations to ease the black students' crossing of cultural barriers at Lowell include the following: establishment of peer counseling groups for students; expanding the career education program with the introduction of black role models; setting up a black parent support group; initiating a small-scale teacher-advisor program; and presenting inservice activities for teachers.

The counselors need to help black students address the issue of academic achievement as acting white and give students more information about occupational opportunities and educational requirements and the advantages and disadvantages of different jobs. The black students need to be put in contact with blacks who have been successful in fields other than sports

and entertainment.

The black parents need to be aware of the school's expectations of behavior from concerned parents. They need to take a pro-active stance in regard to the educational system and learn to use their own expertise in the educational process. Parents who wanted to start a Black Parent Support Group should be encouraged and their plans facilitated by the school. Parents know their children better than any educational experts and care the most about them, and the schools need to welcome and use their expertise.

The teachers who have rapport with their black students and are concerned about them should be encouraged to work with two or three underachieving students to discuss effective school strategies and appropriate behaviors. Students need to be aware of the kinds of school behaviors that are congruent with their own high expectations. Counselors and teachers must educate black students to take responsibility for their own learning and must provide some immediate and tangible rewards for such behavior.

Teachers must be aware of the impact of their cultural perspective upon their perceptions of their black students nd their interactions with them. Their ideas about culturally impoverished black youth and disinterested

parents at Lowell need to be replaced by a realistic understanding of black students and their culture. This could be achieved by inservice programs to heighten teacher awareness and sensitivity and by increased communication with parents and the guidance staff. The administration should provide teachers with opportunities to relinquish the patron-client relationship with parents and develop a new relationship of joint responsibility for educational experiences for students.

Fairfax County is to be commended for its recognition of the problem posed to society when a sizeable minority of the population fails to develop its full potential. One way to address the problem of minority underachievement is to become familiar with the students who constitute the minority, to know their families and friends, to listen to their dreams, their hopes, and fears. Black people in the United States have a great respect for education, as evidenced by their long efforts in the courts to gain access to equal education. Those people who are concerned about the education of all of America's children must not lose sight of that black reverence for education and use it to develop the human potential of all Americans.

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The bibliography has two sections: the first part is a listing of all references cited in the study. The second part is a listing of references on the topics of minority achievement and ethnographic studies, recommended for further reading.

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